

Bulldozing brutalism's bad boys to balance the books won't work

18 January, 2016 By Harriet Harriss



The Prime Minister's housing policy is tough on poverty, but tougher still on the victims of poverty, says *Harriet Harriss*



David Cameron's eye of morder has spotted another public asset snatch and grab opportunity. This time the asset in question is 100 of Britain's social housing estates.

Much like the long-demolished Hulme crescents in Manchester (where I spent eight, 'buoyantly' beneficial years during my youth) – selected 'sink' estates have now been branded 'gifts to criminals and drug dealers', heralding a new era of blaming buildings – rather than government welfare policy – for the socio-economic challenges facing many impoverished communities.

These once proud housing estates were the most efficient and affordable solution to the post-war housing crisis, and it is only after years of deliberate under-investment and neglect, that the damp patches, rats and broken lift mechanisms are now being blasted out of political canons. Of course most architects would like to think that their designs change peoples lives. But to conflate the causes of poverty with the layout of a communal stairwell would probably require Cameron to ingest some of those drugs he's worried about.

But in reality, Cameron is as indifferent to design as he is to the notion of tackling poverty. What's really at stake here is the breaking up of communities whose deepening poverty turns tower blocks into icons of societal imbalance and political resistance.

It's also an act of social cleansing - ousting the urban under-resourced to 'rur-urban' sites devoid of infrastructure and sustainable local economies: somewhere they can quietly become much poorer without anyone really noticing.

And it's most keenly about turning the social housing estates situated within affluent urban postcodes into profit making private enterprises – by taking their ownership out of the hands of local authorities and into the hands of private developers.

Many of the at-risk housing blocks are exemplary modernist icons

But its also a war on aesthetics, too – given so many of the at-risk social housing blocks ear-marked for erasure are also exemplary modernist icons – forming vital components within our richly diverse architectural heritage. If we want to swing a wrecking ball at anything, perhaps we should begin with 'demolishing' the myth of high-rise hating? Why else would a Barbican studio flat cost £700,000 at today's market prices?

Bulldozing brutalism's bad boys to balance the books is what Cameron has referred to as part of his 'turnaround Britain' strategy. Presumably he's referring to how the cost of renting an ex-council studio flat in the Brunswick Centre has now 'turned around' now to set the taxpayer back some £20,000 per year in housing benefits as opposed to the average council rent on a one bed flat of £3,800 per year; a staggering £16,000 difference. Given the public are still paying back the lease-loans Camden took out develop the Brunswick Centre in the 1960's, Cameron is inadvertently turning around the spotlight towards the true 'scroungers' of housing benefits – and they aren't Britain's benefit-dependent poor.

And as any architect worth her salt will tell you, there's no such thing as 'bargain-bulldozing'. According to Gensler, it would have cost Southwark Council several million less to renovate the Heygate Estate's 2,700 flats than it did just to empty them, leaving us to conclude that ball-waving doesn't work on buildings any more than does on voters.

So let's be clear about the sums involved here. Because this isn't about reducing taxpayers liabilities – the selling off and private redevelopment of social housing only increases those.

It isn't about addressing the housing crisis either, since said developers will have 'no choice' but to charge postcode-competitive rents to 'recover' costs, forcing the homeless out of London and further away from greater opportunities for employment and training.

And isn't about helping address poverty – since evicted will families lose the option of affordable social housing forever, and end up forced into unstable and expensive private renting.

So forget blaming brutalism's apparent bad boys. If we're really committed to balancing the books what's needed are robust acts of resilience to protect the last vestiges of our supposedly meritocratic and democratic nation. If this act of material and social aggression against the poorest and most vulnerable city dwellers of today goes ahead, by tomorrow, all our futures will be at stake.

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Alton Estate

Source: John Donat / RIBA Library Photographs Collection

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- [Robert Wakeham](#) 18 January, 2016 12:47 pm

David Cameron's 'eye of morder' has obviously spotted a chance to indulge in a headline catching populist gesture, but this might backfire badly at a time when the supposedly flaky Jeremy Corbyn is being perceived as a great deal more straightforward - as demonstrated by the news of phenomenal increases in labour party membership around the country.
